

Phasmids in the Western Australia Museum.

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Key words

Phasmida, Western Australia Museum.

During a visit to Australia in October 1993, I visited the Western Australia Museum in Perth. While I was in the museum I carried out a brief survey of the phasmids in the collection. To put things into perspective it is useful to know a few facts about Western Australia. The area is 2.5 million square kilometres, ie almost the size of western Europe (i.e. excluding the former USSR); the population is 1.59 million, less than most capital cities in Europe. This huge area is served by the Western Australia Museum which has only one entomologist! The Entomology Department consists of Dr. Terry Houston (a bee specialist), with one technician to assist him. The earliest date of any insects in the collection is about 1900, the first entomologist was appointed in the 1950s. The museum relies mainly on material donated by local amateurs, the staff are too busy with other duties to have time to make general collections.

The phasmids are stored in an air conditioned room, in metal cabinets, which contain glass topped metal drawers. The drawers are not very satisfactory, it is difficult to open them. Inside the drawers the insects are housed in unit trays. A total of 15 drawers are occupied by the phasmids. There are no type specimens in the collection, this is not surprising, very very few phasmids have ever been described by people working in Australia; most have been described by foreigners working in Europe.

A quick survey showed a total of 337 specimens which included a number of nymphs. All the material was Australian except for: 3 *Phyllium* sp., 1 *Prisomera* sp., and one unidentified specimen all from Sri Lanka, and one male *Eurycantha horrida* from New Britain. The commonest phasmid in the collection was a species of *Podacanthus*, represented by 41 specimens, adults and nymphs; a quick look showed adults collected in both June and December. A close second was *Tropidoderus* sp., a total of 39 specimens; third was *Eurycnema goliath* (16 specimens); fourth *Onchestrus* sp.; the remaining 226 specimens were unidentified. I was not very surprised when the only phasmids I found in an hour and a half hunt around the cultivated area outside the house in which I was staying were three nymphs, two green and one brown, of *Podacanthus* sp.; as expected they were feeding on eucalyptus.

In the past parts of Australia have suffered serious pest problems with phasmids defoliating eucalyptus forests. However such outbreaks are rare and have not been reported from Western Australia. With only one entomologist for the whole of Western Australia, and a low population, it is not very surprising that the collection is relatively small. Neither is it particularly surprising that so little has been identified, there is no publication available for identification of Australian phasmids except for Brunner (1907) & Redtenbacher's (1906; 1908) joint monograph. There are undoubtedly many undescribed phasmids in Australia, indeed it is likely that there is a larger proportion of undescribed material there than anywhere else in the world, few other places have been so under studied in this respect. Before going to Australia I did a quick survey: in the last 70 years only three new species of phasmids have been described from Australia.

References

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